

Mindful Transitions and Creative Expression Through Grief



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Learning Objectives

- Understand the grieving process and how it varies for people
- Introduce expressive arts – such as writing, collage and meditation – as a way of helping clients cope with grief
- Explore how the expressive arts can be used as an adjunct to traditional counseling



“Loss changes our world, changes our relations with others, and changes our sense of self. What we once knew is no more. We feel uprooted. We feel homesick.”

-Thomas Attig, author

The Heart of Grief: Death and the Search for Lasting Love, and How We Grieve: Relearning the World



Defining Terms

- Bereavement - the objective event of the loss
- Loss – the act or process of losing something or someone
- Grief - the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and spiritual responses to the death

Grief

- Natural and normal response to loss
- Individual experience, with no set timeframe
- Life-altering experience

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear”

-C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

How We Grieve

- Grief styles -- Doka and Martin:
 - Intuitive – strong emotional reactions; likely to seek social support; expression and exploration of feelings
 - Instrumental – more thinking than feeling; action-oriented (problem-solving and doing)



Grief Process

- William Worden's Four Tasks of Grief
 - To accept the reality of the loss
 - To process the pain of grief
 - To adjust to the world without the deceased
 - To find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life

“It [grief] nurtures transition from loving in the presence to loving in the absence”

- Robert Neimeyer, author, thanatologist

Grief Process

- Stroebe and Schut Dual Process Model
 - Shows an oscillation back and forth between
 - Loss orientation
 - Restoration orientation
 - Need for both confronting and avoiding – adaptive coping

Expressive Arts

- Use of the expressive arts in conjunction with traditional bereavement counseling enriches a person's ability to process his/her grief by allowing the brain to work in new and creative ways

“We are transformed through our telling of the story, whether that telling is in word, visual image, bodily gesture, musical rhythm, dramatic enactment, or ritual.”

-Robert Neimeyer

Expressive Arts

- Opens a window to the healing process
- Creates hope which drives our capacity to transcend loss
- Engages the creative and imaginative process
- Examples
 - Visual arts
 - Movement/Dance
 - Music
 - Writing
 - Drama/Theater
 - Meditation/Mindfulness
 - Yoga

Using Expressive Arts with Grief

- Approaches the grief process holistically
- Allows expression of feelings through non-verbal and unconscious channels
- Clarifies ambivalent and complex feelings by externalizing them
- Facilitates communication in both individual and group settings
- Helps to organize grief, create a sense of control by giving form to the chaotic nature of grief

Using Expressive Arts with Grief

- Provides a safe haven to express difficult, overwhelming emotions
- Promotes the development of coping skills
- Provides outlets for remembering the deceased
- Encourages awareness of self, new identity, personal growth
- Promotes relaxation and physical grounding

Meditation

Benefits for those grieving:

- Mind training that strengthens the ability to remain present
- Facilitates nonjudgmental awareness of thoughts, feelings
- Facilitates stress reduction, relaxation, a peaceful mind
- Helps “break the cycle of suffering” by reducing additional layers of suffering that we create in response to pain



“The essence of meditation is training in something that is quite radical and definitely not the habitual pattern of the species: And that is to stay with ourselves no matter what is happening, without putting labels of good and bad, right and wrong, pure and impure, on top of our experience.”

- Pema Chödrön,
Buddhist teacher, author


Mindfulness Meditation

- Individual counseling session
- Support Group
- Retreat

Contemplative Walk/Sense Walk

- Aimless wandering
- 30-45 minutes
- Done in silence
- Solitary experience
- Using the senses
- Reflecting afterward





***Meditation gives us the opportunity to
have an open, compassionate
attentiveness to whatever is going on.***
- Pema Chödrön



“In the telling and retelling of our story we begin the reconstruction of meaning in our lives.”

-Robert Neimeyer



Writing as a Healing Tool

Benefits of writing:

- helps focus and identify emotions
- constructively channels fear and pain
- explores unresolved issues
- helps make sense of illness and end-of-life experience
- helps in dealing with stress, despair, or depression
- creates a safe place to tell the story
- provides a way to pay tribute or memorialize a person

Writing Opportunities

- Journal writing
- Poetry
- Letter writing
- Essays
- Unfinished sentences
- Lists
- Email



Writing as a Healing Tool

Group exercise:

- Offer easy-to use writing opportunities, 10-15 min.
 - Acrostic poem
 - Free writing
 - Letter
 - Unfinished sentence (e.g. When I think of you now...)
- Play soft instrumental music or allow silence
- Give instructions: set aside inner critic; no “right” or “wrong”; find a stopping point (5 min. advance reminder)
- Process writing experience; optional reading; no critiquing

“It is not important that we write well, that our sentences make no sense to anyone but our selves, or that anyone else ever reads our stories. It is the process of writing that heals, and allows us to look at that which we wish to ignore and change back to the world that existed before the death that has arrived uninvited in our lives.”

- J. Earl Rogers, author, thanatologist

Visual Arts in Grief Work

- Collage
- Sand art
- Painting
- Drawing
- Clay
- Photography
- Scrap booking
- Mask making

Collage

What is collage?

“It is the putting together of images, objects, words and bits of cloth or paper to tell a story, create an image, or express a feeling.”

- J. Earl Rogers, author, thanatologist

“The act of creating crystallizes a client’s grief and allows him or her to see it in a new light.”

-Rebekah Near





"The Dance" - *Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing*
Paper Collage, 5 x 7 inches
May 2008

Strouse, S., *Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing*.
Bloomington, Balboa Press 2013



"Once Upon a Time" - *Artful Grief: A Dairy of Healing*
Paper Collage, 20 x 30 inches
February 2003

Strouse, S., *Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing*.
Bloomington, Balboa Press 2013.

Collage

- Can be used in a variety of settings
 - Therapy
 - Retreat
 - Support group
 - Workshop
- Is an accessible visual art medium to use
- Materials are simple, portable and easy to manage
- Most people feel comfortable cutting, tearing and gluing, which decreases fear factor



Collage

- Working with images stirs the unconscious; allows room for new insights
- Externalizes grief so a person can observe it, reflect on it
- Lends itself to acknowledging opposites and allows the mind to work with opposing emotions
- Creates a visual diary
- Can be effective tool for adults and children



Music Therapy

- Music therapy is an established health profession in which music is used within a therapeutic relationship to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals.

Music and Grief



- Music therapy allows persons experiencing grief or having other mental health needs to: explore personal feelings, make positive changes in mood and emotional states, have a sense of control over life through successful experiences, practice problem solving, and resolve conflicts leading to stronger family and peer relationships.

“Art and creativity are the soul’s medicine – what the soul uses to minister itself, cure its maladies, and restore its vitality.”

-Shaun McNiff, author, international pioneer in expressive arts therapy



Resources

- MD-DC-VA chapter of American Dance Therapy Association, www.md-dc-va-adta.org/
- American Music Therapy Association www.musictherapy.org
- Maryland Art Therapy Association, mata.memberlodge.com/page-1617990
- American Art Therapy Association, www.artherapyy.org
- Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, Art therapy and Meditation, Grief and Bereavement Specialist; Author, Speaker and Workshop Presenter. www.attherefuge.com; www.artfulgrief.com

Local Meditation Resources

- Buddhist Network of Greater Baltimore, bngb.org
- Baltimore Yoga Village, www.baltimoreyogavillage.com
- Breathe Books, breathebooks.com
- Charm City Yoga, www.charmcityyoga.com/meditation

Questions?

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